

WELCOME

Thank you for coming!

We're so glad you've chosen to worship with us today.,

This is a sacred time, as we gather in community to open our hearts to God.

I invite you to light a candle,
wherever you are

As our candles are lit here in our sanctuary,
to remind us of God's presence with us,
and to set aside this as a time of worship for you.

Our service will be in voice and text.

Music will be on the media viewer, so be sure that you have media turned on. .

There will be a link in Nearby Chat if you want to view the video in your own browser.

Now let us all take a deep breath,
breathing in the peace of God
breathing out the stresses of the day
we may have carried here with us.

Let God hold them for you, at least for a while,
as we gather on this holy ground to worship God.

.I'm going to start our Gathering Music and run the rest of the announcements underneath.

GATHERING MUSIC:

"Healing Waters" Trevor Thomson

<https://youtu.be/6IbSGCvSTsE?si=wjBw4AaC9fYbIwPx>

First United Church of Christ and Conference Center Second Life is a church with full real life standing in the Southern California Nevada Conference of the United Church of Christ (UCC).

And anyone you see with a "Minister" tag is an ordained UCC minister in real life. As we like to say, it's good to be real in Second Life!

And as a UCC church, we'd like you to know that
"No matter who you are, or where you are on life's journey,
you are welcome here."

We celebrate God's Love everyday.

and seek to be a place of belonging for those who need it, where all people will be included, accepted and supported in their journey of faith and their struggles in life.

If you would like a bulletin for today's service you can find it in the red binder in the back.

If you would like to make a donation to support this ministry
there is a donation bowl in the back,
or you can go to our website
firstuccsl.org

We thank you for the blessing of your presence and your support.

We will also celebrate Holy Communion together today and all are welcome at the Lord's Table.

So you may wish to gather the elements: some bread, a cracker or cookie, even some cake or pie,

and something to drink such as wine, juice, or water.
Whatever makes you feel closer to each other and to God.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Worship is a time when we,
as a community,
join our hearts together,
to connect to God and to each other.
So this time is the essence of what we do here together.
If you have a prayer that you wish to lift to God,
and have supported by the energy of those gathered here, type it in Nearby Chat at
this time.
As people share their prayers in text
please read them prayerfully
and hold this space as sacred and safe
to open our hearts to God.
Lord in your mercy, hear our prayers.
Prayers for those affected by the floods in the Texas Hill Country.

Lord hear our prayers.
Those voiced here today.
Those spoken only in the depths of our hearts.
Those for which we have no words.
We lift them all to you, O Lord,
with faith in your boundless love and grace.
We pray all this in the name of the one who taught us to eat and to pray together,
saying:
Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name.
Thy kin-dom, thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
and forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass against us
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil,
for thine is the kind-dom and the power and the glory forever.
Amen.

"The River is Flowing"

https://youtu.be/sB2AaVVjF-0?si=K6_iMloOEIq8fB05

The river is flowing, flowing and growing
The river is flowing back to the sea
Mother carry me, your child I will always be
Mother carry me, back to the sea.

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION

Our lectionary scripture reading for today comes from Second Kings in the Hebrew Bible.

It's a story involving the prophet Elisha, who was the successor to the prophet Elijah.

It's also the story of Naaman, an Aramean general.

As a bit of background, although neither of the kings mentioned in this text are named,

scholars believe that the King of Israel would have been Jehoram, son of Ahab, who was killed by the Aramean's, probably led by this very general, Naaman.

So you can see why King Jehoram would be upset

when the Aramean general who was responsible for his father's death

paid him a visit, and delivered a letter from the King of Aram

containing what seemed to be an impossible demand,

to cure General Naaman of his "skin disease," which some translations call leprosy, but was probably not

since he was not required to live in seclusion.

Let us listen to God speaking to us through the words of 2 Kings, chapter 5, verses 1 through 15.

2 KINGS 5:1-15 INRSVUE)

Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, was a great man

and in high favor with his master because by him the Lord had given victory to Aram.

The man, though a mighty warrior, suffered from a skin disease.

Now the Arameans on one of their raids had taken a young girl captive from the land of Israel,

and she served Naaman's wife.

She said to her mistress,

"If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his skin disease."

So Naaman went in and told his lord just what the girl from the land of Israel had said.

And the king of Aram said,

"Go, then, and I will send along a letter to the king of Israel."

He went, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten sets of garments.

He brought the letter to the king of Israel, which read,

"When this letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you my servant Naaman, that you may cure him of his skin disease."

When the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said,

"Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his skin disease?"

Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me."

But when Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes, he sent a message to the king,

"Why have you torn your clothes?"

Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel."

So Naaman came with his horses and chariots and halted at the entrance of Elisha's house.

Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, "

Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored, and you shall be clean."

But Naaman became angry and went away, saying,
"I thought that for me he would surely come out and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God
and would wave his hand over the spot and cure the skin disease!
Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel?
Could I not wash in them and be clean?"
He turned and went away in a rage.
But his servants approached and said to him,
"Father, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it?
How much more, when all he said to you was,
'Wash, and be clean'?"
So he went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God;
his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean.
Then he returned to the man of God, he and all his company;
he came and stood before him and said,
"Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel; please accept a present from your servant."

The Word of God for the People of God.
Thanks be to God.

"Healing Waters"

Let us pray ...
This wasn't what Naaman was expecting, right?
This wasn't the miracle he was looking for. Naaman was a big man, he expected his healing would be a big deal.
He was looking for big-bang pyrotechnics -
like fireworks some of us in the US may have seen a couple days ago on the 4th of July. Flash, and fire, and noise -
I mean - then you can really believe there's something with some power behind it. Something that can HEAL.
Naaman was so sure he knew what a healing miracle would look like,
he almost refused what God wanted to give.
Because what he got wasn't a burning bush or lightning from the sky, but a quiet bath in a local river.
A river - as if he hadn't tried washing before.
The very matter-of-fact ordinariness of it was disappointing. A let down.
Hard to believe a miracle was happening.
And yet, when he came out of the water, he was healed.
Restored, with skin smooth, like a young boy.
And this healing was more than skin deep - his relationship with God was restored too.
He could go back to Elisha and claim his faith.
I love this story.
We all need healing in some way.
We all need a miracle.

But we come to God with expectations, preconceptions about what form that healing will take,
how that miracle will look.
The very word, "miracle," has an aura around it -
magic, supernatural, impossible, unexplainable.
We set the bar so high that a dozen miracles could happen and we wouldn't notice any of them.
They're not what we're expecting.
And if we can explain it through rational processes like medical science,
or because of the simple actions of ordinary people, then it's not really a miracle is it?
And if we're not seeing the grand spectacle we expect -
if the miracles that we are given don't meet our expectations-
we think God doesn't care, God isn't here, or we begin to wonder if God exists at all.
But maybe the story of Naaman should make us rethink how we understand the way God works in our lives, and in the lives of those around us, in our world.
And the Lord knows our world needs a healing miracle.
This past week, I watched as people on the floor of the US Congress clapped and cheered
as they voted to take away health care and food from millions,
to provide more money to billionaires, fund more masked gun-toting agents on our streets
and to incarcerate more people without due process.
The fact people were cheering that is a sign of something
very wrong, something sick, in this country.
And the events in Ukraine, the Middle East, and other places around the globe,
are likewise signs of profound dis-ease in our world.
And it's more than skin deep. We need a healing miracle in the worst way.
So let's look at Naaman's miracle a little more closely.
The mechanism of Naaman's healing was water.
If you want to get a feel for how God cares for God's people, follow the trail of water in scripture.
Over and over again, God's love and care surfaces in the form of water. Like springs in the desert, parting of the Red Sea in the exodus,
baptism in the Jordan, the calming of stormy seas.
But then, water itself, is an ordinary, everyday miracle.
Cold water pouring down my throat or diving into a pool or lake on a blistering hot day,
feeling the cool slide of the water on heated skin - feels like a miracle to me.
Or how about the way everything becomes green and the air smells fresh after it rains?
For a time, it's like the world is made new.
Every time it rains the world is baptized.
Is it any wonder that water is a symbol of new life, resurrection?
What about tears?
We tend to think of them as a sign of something bad, sad -
but the Celts have this idea that tears cleanse our eyes, so we can truly see.
And in the worst of times it can be hard to cry, so when the tears finally come it is a relief.

I suffer from Dry Eye Syndrome – so I experience tears as healing on a daily basis.

And think of how deeply water is connected to the grand miracle of life itself.

Water, probably brought by comets,
made the barren rock that was the early earth into a place that could support an atmosphere – and life.

The first life emerged out of the waters of the ocean,
as we ourselves emerged from the waters of the womb – amniotic fluid is mostly water.

Water fills our very cells. Water is life – looks like a miracle to me.

No one understands the miracle of water as deeply as someone who almost died for lack of it.

And in a world riddle with drought, that happens all too often.

I read about a shrine by the side of a path in the windswept hills of Patagonia.

It's a shrine made up of Coca-cola bottles. It doesn't get more ordinary than Coke bottles.

The shrine is dedicated to Mary Magdalene,
and it celebrates a time when a traveler on this isolated foot path, literally dying of thirst,

found in that spot a piece of garbage, a discarded Coke bottle, filled with water – probably rain water.

It was filled with enough water to save her life.

Over time, people, even the occasional car now, will stop in that out-of-the way, ordinary place,

say a prayer, and leave another Coke bottle of water as an offering.

Naaman's healing, and many other ordinary miracles, brought to you by water.

But Naaman had to get to the water for the healing to happen, and people did that.

A lot of people.

First a captive servant girl in Naaman's household told Naaman's wife that Naaman should see an Israelite prophet who could heal him.

Then Naaman's wife had to tell Naaman.

Then Naaman's king had to agree for Naaman to go to Israel, sending him with a letter of introduction to the king of Israel, a rival country.

That was a funny letter,

because the king of Aram assumed it would be the power of another king that would do the healing. Wrong.

Then the king of Israel had to tell the prophet Elisha about this.

Then Elisha had to recognize the opportunity and agree to help Naaman.

He didn't go to Naaman himself, even though he was on Elisha's doorstep, but sent a messenger.

The messenger had to tell Naaman to go to the river Jordan and bathe 7 times.

When Naaman stormed off in a huff, one of his servants had to approach their angry master

and convince him to try it.

A lot of people, and most of them not even kings or prophets, but servants and slaves,

had compassion for Naaman's suffering and acted to try to help in the ways they could.

Reading this story again, I was struck by what didn't happen.

The captive Israelite girl could have understandably thought to herself,

"Ha, my master is suffering. Serves him right for being an Aramaean oppressor. I bet that prophet in my country could help him, but no way would I ever tell him that. Let him suffer."

Nor did she think, "I'm just a poor captive slave girl far away from home. What can I do?"

The king of Aram didn't reject Naaman's petition saying something like,

"Go to Israel? Forget it. You are my great general. You are needed here. And no way would I ask anything of that sniveling king of Israel. That would make me look weak."

The king of Israel didn't send Naaman away, saying, "Help you? The great general of the enemy who killed my father, why would I do that?"

He didn't try to forbid Elisha from helping Naaman.

Naaman's servants could have left well enough alone, not wanting to brave their master's anger.

Faced with the obstacle of Naaman's stubborn ego and pride, they flowed like water around it,

using their creativity to get Naaman to try what the prophet recommended.

Indeed, all of these people showed not only remarkable compassion,

or at least enlightened self-interest,

but also flexibility.

None of them did it alone, relying not only on God but unknown others.

Instead, together they formed a kind of river of compassion, without which Naaman would never have been healed.

Today, when we are so rigid in our perspectives,

so set in our "us vs. them" way of thinking,

when decisions are being made based on the assumption that not everyone is worthy of health and care,

particularly if they weren't born in this country, or are of different political parties, or hold different beliefs,

this seems like a very great miracle indeed.

Theologian Walter Wink wrote about how we respond to evil.

We can fight, using power against power, even if violent opposition.

Second, we can remain passive or flee from it, essentially opposing it by not opposing it.

Or we can take a Third Way - a way of creativity, ingenuity, compassion, and nonviolence.

The Third Way is the way modelled by Jesus.

In our time, we are faced with great suffering, and great evil.

We need a miracle.

And we can, indeed we must be part of that miracle.

But it's not up to us alone.

Indeed, we can't do it alone.

With God's help, we can do what we can, from where we are,

and trust that the Spirit is working not just through us, but through many others, some of whom we don't know, will never know, to accomplish the miracle needed.

We just need to do our part, become of part of the river of healing water flowing through our land.

Not give up hope, not give into despair or hate,

not futilely banging our fists against the obstacles in our way, but using

creativity, ingenuity, and not a little courage, to flow around them and keep going,

even if we don't know where that river will take us as we wade into the water ourselves.

We need to wade into the healing water with Naaman, let it sustain us and our faith, as it did him.

Wade into the water - and make some waves.

The ripple effect of those waves from even the smallest toe dipped in the river will touch many,

though we may not ever see the result.

It may even make some miracles happen.

I have a small piece of art given to me by a friend with a quote from Albert Einstein,

"There are only two ways to live your life.

One is as though nothing is a miracle.

The other is as though everything is a miracle."

I choose the latter,

and I choose to be part of those everyday miracles in whatever way I can, whatever way is given to me.

I will try to remain flexible, to make choices and take actions not based on hate dressed up as righteousness,

or take rigid positions without compassion.

I will wade into the healing water,

hold onto the Spirit,

remember God's compassionate heart,

and try to make some waves.

Amen.

"The Waves We Give" Beautiful Chorus

https://youtu.be/654sikYivck?si=_y7fWnyu1VFBncxj

SHARING GOD'S TABLE

One of the ways we remember who we are in our compassionate truest selves, and who we are in God,

is through participation in Holy Communion.

Through this holy meal, we reconnect to the story of Jesus, the one who helps us remember.

As we eat and drink together,

we listen to Jesus with our whole bodies, not just our ears.

The Lord's Table is a place

Where we remember that Jesus waded into the water,

made some waves,

and gave his whole self,

what God gave in return,

resurrection, new life.

We are called to be part of that same cycle

Of giving and receiving,

Offering our whole selves,

And this whole meal is nourishment,

what we need,

for that journey Jesus took before us.

This is a meal of love,
Love given, love received.
But it is your choice.
Come to this sacred table not because you must,
But because you may.
Come with an empty place,
Let it be filled with bread.
Come with an empty cup,
Let it be filled with good drink.
Come with an open heart,
And feel God's love fill it.
Come just as you are
This is the Lord's table
And it is spread for you and for me.

I invite you to hold your hands over the elements as we pray:
Lord,
Wherever we are,
in the valley, on the mountain,
no matter how deserted it seems,
we are not truly alone,
because you are with us..
Bless this bread and this cup
May they be vibrant with your grace
Nourishing what is deepest in us.
And through this holy meal
May we come to know
that wherever we are
In Real Life, in Second Life,
We are connected to each other
Through our faith in you,
And that in and through this community,
we may find that your love
Is as real and tangible
As this bread and drink
We share.
Amen.

Now take the bread.
Feel it in your hand.
And let us remember another time, and another table,
when Jesus gathered in a upper room with his disciples,
his closest friends.
When he took the bread on the table for the evening meal, blessed it, broke it, and
shared it saying "This is my body, given for you. Take. Eat. And remember me."

Let us eat this bread of life together.
(pause to eat)

Now pick up your cup of drink,

Because at the end of the meal, Jesus took a cup of wine, the juice of the vine,
And said, "This is the cup of the new covenant, a new relationship in my blood.
Drink, and as often as you drink, remember me."

Let us drink this cup of blessing together.
(pause to drink)

Let us pray.
Lord of all our life,
We give thanks that you have welcomed us
To your table.
As we have been given healing and hope and nourishment
At this table,
May we share it with others,
Each of our offerings coming together
Until all are fed.
Amen.

BLESSING FOR THE JOURNEY

And now,
Our worship is over,
but our ministry to the world is just beginning.
The world is waiting.
for you to wade in the water,
to make some waves,
in love and compassion.
Go in peace, come again in hope.
Amen.

"Wade in the Water" Sweet Honey in the Rock
<https://youtu.be/RRpzEnq14Hs?si=SAT628YZ540NsZyv>

GO IN PEACE